

Guppy History

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The Guppy takes its name from Robert John Lechmere Guppy, a conchologist and geologist (also at one time wrongly, thought to be a clergyman) living in Trinidad. John Guppy was also President of the Scientific Association of Trinidad.

In 1866 John Guppy sent to London a small fish that he had collected from streams in Trinidad. Dr Albert Karl Ludwig Gotthilf Gunther (yes that was his real name), the famous German - English ichthyologist working at the British Museum, named the fish *Girardinus Guppyi* in honour of John Guppy. The genus *Girardinus* was named after the French biologist Charles Girard.

Guppy is credited, as being the first person to discover and describe the wild Guppy, however he was in fact not the first as a Spaniard, De Filippi, found the fish on the island of Barbados in 1862, and assumed that it to be a new genus and species and named it *Lebistes poeciliodes* (*Lebistes* means a kind of fish) previous to De Filippi, there was a German discoverer and it was only due to a filing error that the Guppy is not known as the Gollmer. Julius Gollmer an amateur German biologist, found Guppies in the Rio Guayre near Caracas, Venezuela, in 1857 and 1858. He sent these fish preserved in jars to the Imperial Prussian Academy of Science in Berlin. The ichthyologists were apparently not impressed with the fish and the Museum gave Julius Gollmer only faint praise and a small reward and then promptly filed the jars containing the specimens in the archives.

There they remained until 1859, when Wilhelm Karl Hartwig Peters, head of the ichthyology department wrote the first scientific description on the contents of the jars. Unfortunately, the jars were not well labelled or stored as he ended up describing only the females as belonging to a new species called *Poecilia reticulata* (pronounced PEE-SIL'-EE-AH REE-TIK-YOU-LAY-TA) and failed to describe any of the collected males. The word *Poecilia* means variegated and the word *reticulata* refers to the lacy pattern that is formed by the overlapping scales on the Guppies body.

Sometime after 1866, the original males that Julius Gollmer sent to Berlin were found and labelled *Girardinus Guppyi*. The females that had previously been named *Poecilia* were forced to take on the name of the male counterpart, as was the practice in those days.

The Guppy continued to be sent to numerous different Museums by various collectors and acquired no less than 11 different scientific names. These turned out to be different strains and not new species.

The scientific name of Guppies has undergone a number of revisions in the past 100+ years, finally settling on the name of *Poecilia reticulata* (Rosen and Bailey, 1963) Rosen and Bailey, showed that the correct scientific name was *Poecilia reticulata*, they also included Mollies in the *Poecilia* genus. You may still however see the Guppy described under the scientific name of *Lebistes reticulata* in some scientific publications.

The Guppy enters the Hobby

The first recorded live Guppies to enter Europe were into Germany in December 1908, Carl Siggelkow imported them in to Hamburg.

These first imports certainly had their ability to survive adverse conditions tested, as at that time all goods arriving from tropical Countries were unloaded on the dock side and promptly disinfected by spraying their containers with prussic acid to prevent the spread of plague, yellow and spotted fever, smallpox and cholera, unfortunately this killed off many of the new arrivals but enough survived to breed.

The German Hobbyists were so impressed with the reproductive rate of the Guppy that they nicknamed it the Millionenfisch (million Fish).

The Guppy has also been known by the name of Missionary fish as it converted many to the hobby.

Around 1920 a Leipzig fish club in Germany developed the first points system for judging Guppies, the maximum points available was 50, the club held the first recorded Guppy show in November 1922.

The first fancy Guppy in today's terms that became widely available was the swordtail and although swordtail guppies do occur in the wild, the double swordtail does not and was first isolated and developed around 1928.

The first International Guppy show was in 1954 held in Germany, it was here that the first Veil Tail Guppy was shown to the hobby and was developed by Paul Hahnel. This show attracted thousands of visitors as well as radio and TV coverage.

Great Britain also had its pioneer in the Fancy Guppy world a Mr W. G. Phillips, born in 1883, Mr Phillips may well have been one of the earliest Guppy enthusiasts, at the age of 81 he still had 20 tanks and still occasionally judged Guppy shows.

One of the fish that Mr Phillips gave the hobby was the "Coffer Tail Guppy".

The Coffer Tail Guppy got its name from the fact that it resembled the South Wales miners shovel. During the Second World War, George Phillips sold his excess Guppies to a shop in London. Some months later he returned to the shop and discovered that not all of the fish had been sold, and that the Guppies had been allowed to breed. In the tanks he noticed that some of the males had unusual tail shapes. He took these home and over the next several years he perfected the now familiar Coffer Tail shape.

George Phillips was a true Guppy master, he was also a master craftsman with wood, in fact good enough to carve the bowsprit of the Royal Yacht. Phillips also worked on the design of the Wembley Exhibition and Crystal Palace.

He also created the British Guppy judging standard, from which all subsequent judging standards have been drawn.

George Philips also developed and sent overseas the English Leopard Guppy or English Lace Guppy. It is this Guppy that may well be the original source of all Snakeskin's found throughout the World today. Eduard Schmidt Focke also developed the Half Black Guppy out of this Guppy Strain.

George Philips won over 500 awards for his Guppies, and his house at Regal Way, Kenton was a shrine to the Guppy enthusiast. He was not a secretive man who hid his Guppies away but freely shared them and his ideas, the modern Guppy enthusiast owes him a great debt of gratitude, as we would not have the variety available to us today if it was not for the likes of enthusiasts like George Phillips.

The fancy Guppy hobby was once very active in Great Britain, we had one of the earliest Guppy Associations "The Guppy Breeders Society" long since gone and "The Guppy Association of Great Britain" which sadly ceased to exist in the 1980s some 20+ years ago now.

It is the purpose of this and the future articles that I will be writing to try and rekindle the interest within the British hobbyist, so that once again we can have a flourishing Guppy scene, who knows they may be a budding W. G. Phillips reading this article right now, I hope so.

References:

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